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ABSTRACT

Most of the literature on communication satellites deals with the technological, legal, and political problems of international communication. Few writers have considered what sorts of programing the international audiences might wish to receive or would watch. Several sources of evidence suggest what the choices might be if the entire world is served by satellite-to-home, multiple channel international television. These sources are: audience reactions to "foreign" programs presently available through the domestic television services of certain countries; numerical data on programs interchanged through such regional structures as Eurovision and Intervision; and amounts and kinds of viewing done of foreign stations that can be widely received in other countries, for example, West German stations in most parts of Holland and Syrian television in many parts of Lebanon. While there appears to be an increasing interest in national and regional history, this greater interest in things national may be accompanied by a decreased interest in things foreign where television is concerned, resulting in a take over of foreign program forms for recasting in a more national mold. (Author/RB)

International Television Programing: If People Could Have It, Would They Watch It?

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In view of the fact that television by satellite is still in its relative infancy, much of what I have to say here this afternoon might be regarded as beating a not-yet-dead horse, for most of my remarks concern the ultimate in international broadcast television: a truly international range of program choices at the disposal and under the control of individual viewers worldwide. Yet I hope that at least some of what I have to say will also prove thought-provoking to those who in one way or another deal with the current state-of-the-art in international television programing: regional exchanges, program sales to other countries, governmentally-prepared programs for international placement. And perhaps the development of a truly international, free-flow, free choice range of television programing will come upon us sooner than we think, despite the various problems alluded to by my colleagues this afternoon. Perhaps viewers worldwide will someday have the opportunity to view information and entertainment direct from Moscow, London, Cairo, Tokyo, New York and other points. This afternoon, I shall attempt to have you forget for the moment all of the legal, technical, economic and other commonly-cited barriers to international television and concentrate on programing: what would an international audience be likely to watch, if anything, should the range of choice become truly international?

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I must admit at the outset that my "answers" to this question come from fragments of evidence, but if, after hearing me speak, you become more interested in this question, you may join me in the quest for more data of the sort we already possess in small quantities, and may also join me in my insistent nagging of research organizations for more specific questions of the sort that are rarely being asked at present. The data I shall use this afternoon comes from three principle sources: broadcast schedules, survey research reports, and figures on program exchange, principally for Eurovision. As you'll soon see, the quantity of data is not only in each case small, but also, as always there are problems with data reliability and interpretation. I again remind you that my intention is to arouse interest in an aspect of international television that appears to have been all but forgotten in the welter of material on economic, legal and technical matters, and yet an aspect of which it can truly be said, sine qua non: without this, there is nothing worth considering--at least where television broadcasting is concerned.

Surely the slimmest source of data on what a hypothetical viewer might wish to see from "foreign" television, were it regularly available, is the set of annual Eurovision program exchange statistics released by the EBU.[1] There are many reasons why specific programs are or are not transmitted through the Eurovision system, and viewers' wishes are doubtless not of the same importance as copyright, translation and union contract stipulations, to name three factors which guide program availability through Eurovision. Yet in reading

articles and in talking to television executives in various countries about Eurovision, I am struck with how often the accent seems to be placed on taking those programs that emphasize the similarities between countries, rather than celebrating their differences. By this token, it is not surprising that sports events should have accounted for 80% of the total number of non-news programs exchanged through the system, while folklore accounted for less than .5% and music just over 1%. Granted, there is far less folklore available on any one nation's television system(s) than there is sports, but the gulf is not that great, and it's far less great for music. Again I acknowledge that factors of copyright and union contract, as well as translation, must also be taken into account, but if there is a demand on the part of various national publics for more folklore and music from foreign countries, I have never heard a European television executive speak of it. I would contend that the low figures for exchanges on folklore and music are at least in part due to general audience disinterest in these categories, though I will freely admit the possibility that public demand could be higher, but simply hasn't been assessed accurately by program decision-makers. As you'll hear me say more than once this afternoon, this is a subject that needs research.

A second indicator of likely audience reactions to the greater availability of foreign television can be found in instances where national boundaries and transmitter locations bring one nation's TV service to the screens of another nation. I trust you are all quite familiar with the results of this phenomenon where the United States

Canada are concerned, but I also trust that you realize that the impact of American TV on Canadians was aided by several years' head start on our part in TV broadcasting and by some specific business patterns that had developed in the field of radio programing in the 1930s. It would be fairer to look at instances where two television systems "grew up" at about the same time and rate, and where the language(s) used in transmission are understandable by large segments of the population on both sides of the border. The situation that comes most readily to mind is that of the two Germanies, where indeed these conditions are fulfilled. I have seen survey results for the top-rated shows in West Germany, and the fact that no East German show appears among them is probably due in part to the limited transmission range of East German TV where West German viewers are concerned: I would estimate then no more than 20% of the West Germans can receive East German TV signals. The situation is somewhat "better" (depending on your perspective) in East Germany, where the figure would probably be somewhere between 30% and 40%. I have never seen East German TV ratings (DDR Fernsehen <u>does</u> have an active and seemingly well-staffed research department, and they <u>do</u> conduct surveys in which program popularity is assessed), but again, I would be surprised to see any West German shows in the "top ten" on a <u>national</u> basis (East Berlin could well be a different matter), simply because too many East Germans live outside the range of West German television signals or are actively discouraged from viewing them (although this is far less often the case now than it used to be). But I have talked with numerous East and West German television executives and with numerous

East and West German television viewers, as well as with other Western observers of the two television systems, and on this admittedly slim basis I would say that each side enjoys the other side's light entertainment (East German TV tends to draw great praise for this from the West German executives and viewers I've talked to), West Germans enjoy the East German childrens' TV programs (especially a charming fairy-tale-like series called "The Sandman"), and East Germans watch the news from the West with great fascination when they have the feeling that something is occuring which their own service is not covering, BUT FEW WATCH ON A STEADY, DAY-TO-DAY BASIS. The vast amount of cultural programing put out by each system, as well as the rather considerable number of documentaries which could serve as a "window" on the inner workings of each society, seems largely to be ignored by viewers across the border.

Viewing conditions in certain parts of the Middle East approximate those in the two Germanies. About 30% to 40% of the Lebanese population lies within reach of television signals from Syria, while perhaps 20% to 30% of the Syrian population can receive Lebanese television. The percentage is smaller for Israel and Lebanon and for Jordan and Lebanon, but considerably higher for Jordan and Israel. In the summer, the so-called "tunneling effect" also allows many Lebanese viewers to receive clear, dependable signals from as far away as Cairo for a period of about three months; this same phenomenon also "boosts" the signal from Jordan. The only country for which I have precise viewing figures for foreign channels is Lebanon, and, since the survey was conducted in December, 1973, the Cairo and Jordan signals were less easily received than they would be in summer.[2] Syrian television

was watched "usually by about 9% of all Lebanese TV homes, Cairo television by about 3%, Jordanian television by about 1%. Even taking into account the fact that set penetration was not uniformly high in the areas reached by the three foreign services--it ran from 52% to 86%--the figures would seem to show that there is no overwhelming desire on the part of the Lebanese to view Syrian, Egyptian, or Jordanian programs. This could be due to differences in Arab dialect, although the Lebanese I spoke to claimed that the differences aren't all that great, but I suspect, from what these same individuals told me, that they simply didn't have that much interest in following life in Egypt, Jordan or Syria as reflected through television--and television is frequently used to portray the life of the nation in all of these countries.

In the cases of the two Germanies and of Lebanon, it should be pointed out that viewers have access to more than one domestic channel. I suspect that this has a lot to do with creating a measure of viewer satisfaction with the "home product," especially if the programing on the two or more channels is carefully balanced in terms of choice. It may be that viewers become slightly uneasy with even minor differences of language, dress and behavior in a viewing situation such as I have described, and, given a choice, will stick with that which is most congenial, most familiar. Again, this is a supposition, but I think it worth testing, in terms of what it could tell us about audience receptivity to international television.

The greatest amoung of data exists for the third indicator of likely audience reactions to international television: ratings of

foreign programs broadcast over domestic television. Few broadcasting systems in the world fail to include foreign programs in their schedules, and many are heavily dependent on this source. As was the case in the other two categories,of data, there are some problems of data interpretation here: a foreign program may or may not be purchased and shown by a local TV station for a variety of reasons, of which assumed or demonstrated audience preference is only one; other reasons may include monetary considerations, availability of programs already dubbed in the local language, or simply alert or lax program salesmen. But once a program is actually shown over local or national television, we do often have a record of how well it did vis-a-vis the competition, either in the form of other programs on the air at that time or other things to do besides watching television.

American program suppliers were early active in the field of overseas sales, and for some time were quite successful at it, although their success should not be taken as a necessary indication of popularity of the programs where the viewers were concerned (a low price or the whims of the buyer could often have "clinched" a sale). Today, one sees widespread evidence that the American television presence overseas is still prominent, although the British, Japanese, and West Germans, and, for former French colonies and protectorates, the French (ditto to a more modest extent for the Spanish), are providing increasing competition, as are Lebanon and Egypt for the Arab World.[3]

I dealth with both the likely and the measurable impact of American television on foreign audiences in a summer, 1968 Journalism Quarterly article. The intervening years appear to have brought something of an

erosion in the American position. In the area of overseas program sales alone, the figure for the U.S. as of 1970 of $100 million was in 1971 now down to approximately $85 million.* Not all of this is due to the competitive efforts of other countries. Nor to the attempts of some countries to bar the importation of "too much" American programing. If the Middle East can stand as any sort of example of what is going on throughout the world--and I believe that, to a large extent, it can--local and bi-national production is taking over, and nations which were once absolutely dependent on the American or other foreign product for the bulk of their schedules are now to an increasing extent "rolling their own," so to speak.[4] I watched, read about and discussed many local television productions in Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait and Cyprus during my past year in the Middle East, and many of these programs--e.g., a 13 program dramatic series on the life of a small Lebanese village, a series of musical dramas set in Moorish Spain, an Egyptian drama about family planning, a comedy-variety show produced by Syrians and Lebanese--were of considerable professional polish and sophistication. In the only instance where I've seen a specific "foreign versus local" program preference question asked, 55.8% of Lebanese viewers said that they prefer to view local programs only, whereas 12.2% claimed that they prefer to view foreign programs only, while 18.4% say they prefer a mixture of the two.[5] While not particularly high, these figures do seem to reveal a not inconsiderable audience for foreign programs in Lebanon. In practice, however, foreign programs fared poorly: the same survey, in a sub-

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*See next page.

*The figure for 1972 is $94 million and for 1973 $136 million, but, according to a Motion Picture Export Association executive with whom I talked on August 13, 1974, it is quite possible that these figures do not represent real growth: dollar devaluation must be taken into account, and the 1973 figure is greatly inflated by an unusually large bloc of sales by one company. The MPEA executive estimated that $100 million would be a more realistic figure for 1973, and added that, in his personal estimation, it was indeed becoming increasingly difficult to sell American TV programs overseas.

section dealing with actual viewing in Beirut and suburbs, revealed that, in terms of actual programs viewed, the highest-rated foreign program, The Protectors, finished well down the popularity list, with 42% of all TV homes (and the advantage of being shown over both "Arabic" channels). The "foreign-language" Lebanese TV channel, Channel 9, which broadcasts mostly French, British and American programs in their original languages, but with Arabic subtitles, drew an average of 12% of all viewers claiming to watch it "usually"; the "Arabic" channels (which also carry some foreign programing with Arabic subtitles) had an average "usual" viewership of 95% and 77%. Highest-rated shows were the news (c. 50%, on the average evening), a locally-produced comedy-satire (58%) and two relatively light serial-dramas about life in Lebanese mountain villages (52% and 50%). Any given evening of television afforded a number of opportunities to view "Western" programs, but almost never did those Western programs top their Lebanese competition on the other channel(s).

A survey taken by ABC of Beirut in Kuwait (April 1973) was far less explicit than the same firm's previously-cited Lebanese survey, in that it merely asked viewers to indicate their "preferred" programs by category, but the results are interesting: local dramatic fare received just over 32% mentions, Arabic films nearly 28%, foreign serials a little over 23%, and Arabic serials a little over 21%.[6] There is a good deal of foreign fare available on Kuwait television, as well as from a TV station in Basra, Iraq (which 17% of the Kuwaitis claim to watch) and a TV station in Iran (which 18% of the Kuwaitis

claim to watch), but the figures cited do not seem to indicate an overwhelming preference on the part of most Kuwaitis for Western program fare.

In a 1972 survey by ABC Beirut in Jordan,[7] the top-rated five shows were all local or Arab World, but the sixth spot went to "Hawaii 5-0," watched by 69% of those who "usually" watch television, and "To Rome With Love," "Storefront Lawyers," "Dennis the Mance," "Peyton Place" (which also claimed 50% of Dutch viewers in a 1971 NOS survey, and was the highest-rated recurring "foreign" show on Dutch TV), "Bewitched," "Survival" and "The Persuaders" all pulled 50% or better figures; but seventh, ninth and tenth places all went to local or Arab World shows (eighth place was claimed by a telecast of a European circus).

These three Arab World examples offer embryonic, but interesting, evidence that at least some nations are seeing a good deal of themselves on television, and apparently enjoying what they see. And in Japan, where most of the commercial channels present a good number of foreign programs, even if the public-service NHK does not, rarely will an American or other Western program make the "top ten": Nielsen data from late 1971-early 1972 for the Tokyo area shows only Japanese programs in the "top ten," four of them news reports or documentaries.[8]

None of the previous data, other research or data that I have discussed with French, West German and British broadcast officials or researchers over the past several years, portends a total loss of

popularity for shows originating from beyond the national borders, but neither does it seem to indicate that viewers are showing a strong preference for foreign fare, as even the 1973 Nordenstreng and Varis report seems to indicate might be the case (p. 56). We need to examine more data of this sort, and to do so over time, before we can predict trends with any confidence but the data I have seen thus far seems to indicate that television is becoming more and more national in many, and perhaps even most, parts of the world, with less and less schedule space and/or popularity for "imported" programs.

It is possible, of course, that the rise in popularity of certain types of locally-produced programs can be explained in part by their successful imitation of existing Western "models," and indeed I have seen shows in Tokyo and London that closely resembled the Johnny Carson Show, while certain of the West German crime dramas could not be distinguished all that much from those on American television. But I have also seen what appears to be an increasing interest in national and regional history in television programs from West Germany to Turkey to Lebanon to Japan, and I must wonder whether this greater interest in things national--if further research should indicate that this is truly the case--may not be accompanied by a decreased interest in things foreign, or at least, where TV is concerned, a taking-over of foreign program forms for "recasting" in a more national mold.

Finally, if I have interpreted my small fund of data correctly--and that's a very large <u>if</u>--surely we must wonder why this is so. Could it be because the often minor differences in costuming, language,

style of direction, and so forth, bother us more than we realize? Could it be because a tension-filled world causes us to feel more comfortable with that which is closest to us? Could it be that the sheer effort of attempting to understand a foreign culture, when such understanding would seem to bring with it so few tangible, immediate benefits, simply isn't worth the effort on the part of most viewers? I am not sure what the answer is, or, more probably, the answers are, since I know from self-analysis that I am more receptive to messages from abroad at certain times than I am at others, and for different reasons. But I do feel that anyone who for any reason sees satellite-to-home international television programing as a potentially useful device for future cross-cultural communication should give very serious consideration to the matters I have sketchily outlined here--and, come to think of it, those who are presently involved in cross-cultural communication through television might profit from such consideration, as well. That would at least have the virtue of letting me know within my own lifetime whether I'm on the right track!

FOOTNOTES

[1]The latest set--for calendar 1971--may be found in the EBU Review, Vol. XXV, No. 3 (May, 1974), pp. 44-46.

[2]Syndicated Media Survey: Lebanon. Beirut: ABC Research, December, 1973.

[3]Kaarle Nordenstreng and Tapio Varis' Television Traffic--a one-way street? Paris: UNESCO, 1973 (Reports and Papers on Mass Communication No. 70) provides some numerical evidence of this, although my own experience in Lebanon, which allowed me to compare my figures with theirs, leads me to wonder how carefully some of their data was gathered.

[4]The Nordenstreng and Varis study cited in FN 3 shows that a number of nations, especially in Latin America, are still heavily dependent on imported shows, while certain categories of program production--feature films in particular--are more likely to be imports than not.

[5]Syndicated Media Survey: Beirut, op. cit.

[6]Syndicated Media Survey: Kuwait. Beirut: ABC Research, April, 197

[7]A TV and Radio Survey in Joran. Beirut: ABC, February, 1972.

[8]Cited in Nielsen Newscast, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Spring, 1972), p. 7.